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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a rationale for group pre-marriage counseling based on the social nature of factors influencing the marriage model. The author suggests that while group pre-marriage counseling invites disillusionment, it offers the antidote--the realization that disillusionment occurred not necessarily because of a bad choice, but because of unrealistic expectations. The group gives each individual a different perspective for viewing this problem. Moreover, there are other advantages: (1) it sounds less threatening than counseling with the individual couple; (2) it permits voluntary self-exposure; and (3) it may be seen as "refined rapping." Some disadvantages include a possible difficulty in pursuing an individual couple's interest or need to their satisfaction, more restricted self-exposure, and the tendency for some couples to compare their own relationship with others rather than evaluate it in terms of itself. Unique features of group counseling are listed which augment interpersonal growth and accelerate behavioral change. Based on practical experience, a discussion is made of the merits of having co-counselors to direct the group. Objectives of group pre-marriage counseling are given as a general guide for implementing the model. (Author/MA)

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Group Pre-Marriage Counseling: A Tentative Model

By

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Group Pre-Marriage Counseling: A Tentative Model

Every potential marriage couple, in trying to establish a relationship mutually satisfying and acceptable as a basis for marriage, is moving toward some theoretical model of what such a relationship should be. The model may be only dimly perceived and subject to abrupt alteration. But it exerts a compelling influence on the behavior of the couple and it is primarily this phenomenon with which the pre-marriage counselor is concerned.

There are four principal sources of input which affect an individual's theoretical marriage model. These include:

1. Attitudes - the beliefs that predispose an individual to think or act one way or another.

2. Values - the enduring criteria a person uses to make judgments.

3. Expectations - anticipations that people and events will and should behave and occur as one imagined they would. When these become strongly emotionalized, they become emotional needs.

4. Self-image - the way a person sees himself and his role in marriage.

Herein lies the chief rationale for group pre-marriage counseling. While these four influences on the marriage model -- attitudes, values, expectations, and self-image -- are highly individualized, they are nonetheless a product of social interaction with a multitude of people. In the group setting social interaction can be brought to bear as each couple examines in an accepting group climate these aspects of their marriage model. The individual couple has greater opportunity to examine these in the presence of others, and greater freedom to modify their views when they receive social sanction for doing so.

No generation has had a greater need for examining fixed expectations than the current one. In their film-provoked fantasies girls believe that their men will have all the resoluteness, decisiveness, intelligence, perception, good looks, and wealth of the television or movie hero, etc. In addition, their men will naturally have all the desirable attributes of the girls' fathers. Almost imperceptibly these dreams will become internalized, whether the girls know it or not.

Men live no closer to reality. They are certain that "their wives will be paragons of beauty, charm, poise, and elegance; they will be sweet, kind, tender, and loving, and, in addition, they will have unquestioned skills as homemakers, mothers, and sex partners. They will also be fine cooks, appliance mechanics, chauffeurs, purchasing agents, accountants, child psychologists, and psychiatrists for their husbands. Moreover, they will be warm and tender, submissive, agreeable, and adaptable, and their goals in life will be to fulfill their husband's every wish."

Pre-marriage counseling invites the onset of disillusionment. Group pre-marriage counseling offers the antidote-namely-the realization that disillusionment occurred not necessarily because of a bad choice, but because of unrealistic expectations; e.g., one man became confused because his fiance became moody and he felt helpless to remedy the situation. In the group it became apparent that all the girls, and indeed all the men, occasionally became moody. The group, therefore, gave him a different perspective for viewing his problem.

College students are more likely to view the search for individual pre-marital counseling as negative, i.e., a plea for help, a confession of weakness in the relationship, directly tied to some kind of pathology, and as an acknowledgement of deficiency or movement away from health. This is a learned response, of course. One seeks help when it is needed. Pre-marriage counseling sounds like marriage counseling done in advance. There is little opportunity for couples to feel that private counseling is the sensible, growth-promoting activity they desire. They can feel better about counseling when the burden is not on them to arrange it.

Group pre-marriage counseling provides conditions which meet their needs:

1. As a group act, it is less a confession of personal uncertainty.
2. As something initiated and promoted by others, it permits entrance without undue exposure.
3. It sounds less threatening. "We can look at the relationships of others." "There is no reason to believe we will see the need for change in ourselves."
4. It permits voluntary self-exposure and withdrawal with greater ease. "We can sit back and stay out of it until we see what it's all about." In the one-to-one relationship, non-involvement can not be camouflaged, even to the client's satisfaction.
5. It may appear to be the "in" or fashionable thing to do. Rapping is a positive good. Getting inside another's skin in a worthwhile goal. Group pre-marriage counseling is likely to be seen as refined rapping.

Specific liabilities are inherent in the group process. Perhaps the most significant problem is the difficulty encountered in pursuing an individual couple's interest or need to their satisfaction. The need of one couple may be more intense in a given area than that of others so that they are reluctant to leave a topic while others wish to consider something new. In a similar

vein, a discussion of one topic will occasionally generate interest in a different topic, which cannot be followed immediately and may subsequently be lost. This situation may create frustration for individuals or couples, but more often simply represents a missed opportunity, which could have been siezed in individual counseling.

The second danger present in group pre-marriage counseling is the propensity of some couples to compare their own relationship with others rather than evaluate it in terms of itself. The immediacy of other relationships, as well as the exposure to more intimate information about them, lends itself to this comparing. Much of the conversation between couples in the interval between group sessions must be devoted to "what do you think about them" conversation. However, for a couple to question "How are we like that other couple?" or "How are we different from them?" may provide a necessary point of reference for self-evaluation.

A third disadvantage is the more restricted self-exposure in the group setting. Most people have little experience in lowering defenses before a group; fewer have the ability to do it when they so desire. It is unquestionable that danger to the self is increased as the number of people to whom the self is shown is increased. Therefore, the deepest fears, the aspects of real self most inconsistent with ideal self, and feelings judged to be most unacceptable to the group will less often be presented in the presence of several others. They are more likely to be considered in a private audience with one counselor. While it is true that the group limits consideration of the most important relationship problems, it is nonetheless true that the private audience would less often be sought without the prior group experience.

Although one may encounter these and other difficulties, none is likely to be so severe as to make the effort not worthwhile. Our subjective appraisal runs in the opposite direction; the unique benefits to pre-marriage counseling provided by the group structure make the liabilities seem minor in proportion.

The group method is particularly well-suited to the instructional-counseling process of preparation for marriage. Interpersonal dynamics peculiar to group involvement are conducive to the thinking, feelings, and behavior desirable in pre-marriage counseling. First, there may be learning and healing potential within a group beyond that found in individual counseling. One's capacity for creating and maintaining a long-term relationship with a spouse is the product of his ability to relate to other people. The group encourages growth in human relationships at many levels.

Secondly, a great variety of meaningful ways by which couples can relate, react, and respond can be elicited in the group. Under these conditions, the counselor may employ the reality observed which is always more understandable and believable than a spoken assertion. To the extent that problems in relationships, as well as strengths, are dramatized by group members, the counselor's didactic role is diminished.

Thirdly, confused feelings can be examined with greater ease within a supportive group than is sometimes possible in the presence of just the intended spouse and counselor. Almost every concern voiced by individuals in the group will immediately strike a responsive chord in the other participants. A sharing of fear paradoxically results in a sharing of strength to face the source of fear.

Fourthly, a group often helps break the isolation of guilt felt by individuals. Some people feel guilt for what they are; some, for what they have been. Some feel guilt for what they are doing; others, for what they have done. Some feel guilty for their feelings; others, because they cannot feel what they believe they should. The group is in a position to foster the dissipation of guilt through acceptance, through identification, and through rejection of the attitudes and beliefs causing it. Of course, an individual counselor can accomplish the same thing in the same way, but one must not forget the social basis of guilt. The more people who can demonstrate acceptance, the more rapidly individuals receiving it can move toward mental health and interpersonal competence.

Group counseling has one other unique feature which augments interpersonal growth. Certain personality characteristics of an individual may more easily be observed in a group setting than in individual counseling, for example, shyness, insecurity, need to dominate. The characteristic way a person handles various interpersonal situations also becomes obvious in a group, such as the way of handling anger, embarrassment, or failure. It is more difficult for an individual to successfully manage the impression many people have of him than to manage the impression a fiance has.

Group counseling permits the individual to see how his intended spouse affects and is affected by other people. The result is observation of the partner with less distorted perception. If one looks at his own love partner through another person's eyes, he is more likely to see through the romantic haze to what is really there.

As a justification for group pre-marriage counseling, economy must be applied to time quite sparingly. If the group meets one and one-half

to two hours weekly, and is restricted to five couples, one counselor could save from 6 to 8 hours a week by conducting the group. However, it is the rule rather than the exception that one or more of the five couples will, concurrently with the group sessions, wish to see the counselor individually. Although it is indisputable that a greater number of people can be helped through the group method, the economy of time achieved is more likely to derive from the speed with which couples begin to understand and modify their relationships as a result of the group interaction. The increased speed of change seems to be related to the following factors:

1. Concurrence of other couples reduces need for denial. ("Yes, that is true of our relationship too.")

2. Healthy competition may be spawned. "Let's see if we can work it out before they do," or "if they can resolve that, so can we."

3. The group is more capable of doing away with the romantic complex as a basis of marriage. It is far safer to break idols in the presence of others.

4. The group provides practice in skills required for good relationships, namely, empathy, positive regard, congruence, etc.

5. Wanting to bring something to the group seems to be motivation for working on the relationship during the week interval between sessions.

This model is based on practical experience. No claim is made that it is the best or most desirable arrangement; only that it is a workable one. Ideally, the group should have no more than six couples; five couples is the preferable size. As much homogeneity as possible is desired in terms of the level of relationship among couples. Occasionally a married couple may be permitted to join the group. While they frequently add realism to the discussion in saying not "how it will be" but "how it is", they are also occasionally viewed

by the engaged couples as outsiders and treated with some reserve. A married counselor does not pose the same threat of knowledgeability or superiority as the married couples who have made some formal committment to marriage, if only in the form of a spoken agreement. Each counseling session should last no less than one and one-half hours.

It is suggested that two counselors be responsible for conducting a single group. Advantages of this may not be so obvious, but when it is tried, it will probably be accepted.

Although some counselors may question the practice, it is unlikely that group members will. For some reason it seems to be a natural arrangement. Perhaps having two counselors present facilitates the entry of each into the group. The image of authority is broken down by the sharing of the leadership role, while, at the same time, confidence is increased that the group will be skillfully conducted.

Although it is a plebian type advantage, it is indisputable that there is less likelihood of the group's losing leadership on any given occasion when two leaders are involved. It is important to the group process that the weekly meeting be uninterrupted over a period of at least ten weeks, and preferably longer. Having two counselors minimizes the possibility that the continuity of the group will be broken. When one must be absent, the other may conduct the session alone and then brief his colleague on the proceedings.

A second advantage of having co-counselors is that one counselor may sometimes withdraw temporarily to observe the entire group in a more objective manner, without having to devote part of his energies to participation. He

may form useful conclusions about the entire group which were derivable only from a more detached position, may occasionally be able to concentrate his full attention on individuals, or give more attention to those who are not actively participating. These activities are possible, of course, only when one is relieved of the total responsibility of directing the entire group.

The third advantage is the enlarged awareness of what individuals are communicating. Even after years of counseling, some selectivity continues to operate in the counselor's perception. He hears that to which he is most attentive, that with which he feels the most comfortable, that which he has heard before and learned to anticipate. Two counselors, therefore, will often perceive the expression of different needs in a single communication. For example, one engagement partner may say, "It seems like the more we talk about a problem, the farther we get from any kind of acceptable solution." Depending on the non-verbal cues associated with the statement and the total context of discussion within which it was made, it would be possible to perceive frustration and helplessness, anger and recrimination, or resignation and fatalism. If two counselors are present, the real feelings are more likely to be perceived and dealt with. This also is the primary difficulty caused by dual counselors working out a system whereby one defers to another when two different lines of approach seem indicated. One solution may be to proceed with the concept first presented until it appears to be non-productive. If two counselors like and respect one another, the tendency will be for each to support the other in what he seeks to accomplish rather than to compete for the right to lead the discussion.

Having co-counselors facilitates what Rogers calls "congruence" -- a state obtained when, in the relationship with his client, the counselor is genuine and without "front" or facade, openly being the feelings and attitudes which at that moment are flowing in him. When the feelings the counselor is experiencing are available to him, then he is able to live these feelings, be them in the relationship, and able to communicate them if appropriate. This is difficult enough when meeting someone on a person-to-person basis. When trying to meet a group on this basis, one often needs help if a high degree of congruence is to be possible. Two counselors have greater capacity for empathy than one, particularly when more than one personal world are being explored simultaneously.

One of the more direct advantages of dual leadership is the immediate and continuing opportunity for professional consultation. Most counselors do not have their counseling abilities evaluated after the termination of their professional training. If desired, this affords an excellent opportunity for exchanging evaluative comments regarding counseling ability. After each session, counselors may offer impressions of what occurred in the group as a whole, and among individual couples. It is helpful for each counselor to indicate where he sees each couple in terms of their progression towards a certain kind of relationship. This situation is unsurpassed as an opportunity for receiving either corroboration or refutation of one's analysis of individuals and his perception of behavior.

The following safeguards may be set up to minimize directional conflicts:

1. Agree that any disagreement over the direction of the group will be settled after a session, never while it is in progress.

2. Agree that if one initiates a particular topic, the other will support him until the originator makes it clear that he is willing to proceed.

3. Agree that when a participant clearly directs his remarks to one of the leaders, that leader will be expected to assume the prominent role.

4. Agree that it is permissible for the counselors to consult briefly and openly during the group meeting if there is uncertainty about the issues to be discussed.

The group model as presented here is developmental and non-directive. Participants should spontaneously decide on the topics of felt-importance. The role of the counselors should be that of facilitating examination of self and understanding of the established relationship. Objectives to be held by the counselors and used as a general guide are:

1. The understanding of emotional needs and their effect upon the relationship

2. Recognition of marriage role expectations

3. Development of skill in communication affecting the relationship

4. Development of understanding of and control over conflict in the relationship

5. Development of a situation within which couples may give and receive feedback from other couples

The basic principle supporting group pre-marriage counseling is that the group has insights and strengths to be shared which the individual counselor may not possess. Individuals may be able to see in other couples what they are unable to see directly in themselves. The group may act as a hall of mirrors which reflects the relationship from many angles. It is

possible, in this sense, for engaged couples to look at themselves vicariously.

An individual couple, even with a counselor's help, may not be able to identify all of the important areas of their relationship which merit examination. The group has greater ability to ferret out relationship characteristics that are adept at hiding, and to help individual couples feel that self-knowledge is, at least, no more threatening or damaging than self-deceit.